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AND THEIR PURCHASE INTENTION**

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Abstract

This research explores consumers' underlying motives for luxury brand mimicry consumption using functional theories as the basis. Three studies are designed to measure consumers' attitudes toward luxury brands serving as either social adjustive or value expressive function and their varied preference for mimic luxury brands. Also, the constraining effect of imitation types and their relationship with consumer' moral beliefs will be measured in these two types of consumers. Finally, it will also look into how product characteristics, such as brand logos, and situational characteristics, like advertisements, influence consumers' attitudes toward luxury brands and what is the meaning in curbing the demand of mimic luxury products. A set of hypothesis will be developed through relevant literature and theories and potential significance of this research is also presented.

Background

When imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, the prevalence of brand imitation and counterfeit spreads every corner of market. Unlike counterfeit, which is illegal and designed to 'be like' the original and provide consumers with a less expensive copy, brand imitation is designed so as to 'look like' and make consumers 'think of' the original brand (d'Astoud and Gargouri,2001). Given that it utilises the similarity of original brands in package, design, brand name, advertising, etc. so as to facilitate the acceptance of a brand by consumers and share the success of the original brands (Wilcox et al., 2009), brand imitation has been widely used as a profitable marketing strategy.

In luxury brand market, the high profit and classical design of luxury brands make them a primary target to be mimicked by both new entrants and existing mass brands. The brand mimicry drives the popularity of fast fashion, middle range brands and the masstige brands. On the other hand, it also receives increased attention that imitation is not limited to lower-end brands mimicking higher-end brands. Luxury brands also emulate the successful and key

characteristics from the lower-end brands or the other luxury brands(such as Louis Vuitton vs Bew Balance’s athletic shoes, and YSL vs Christian Louboutin’s red soles), in order to jump into bandwagon or retain their market share.

Although some researchers claim that the majority of so-called “new” products are really innovative imitation due to the same consumption pattern (Levitt, 1966), and mimic brands can provide better products by absorbing the strength and benefits of the original brands, it is still undeniable that mimicry in the market deteriorates the model brands’ reputation and profit and causes brand confusion. The trademark infringement battle between Gucci and Guess in 2009 is one of many cases that fashion brands imitate the luxury brands in features or themes.

While previous research on brand imitation has increased the understanding of this phenomenon and explained consumers evaluation of brand imitation (d’Astoud and Gargouri,2001; Warlop and Alba,2004; Horen and Pieters,2012), this research focuses on the imitation phenomenon in luxury brands and explores the underlying motives of mimic luxury brand purchases using functional theories of attitude.

1.0 Relevant literature and hypothesis development

Functional theories of attitude have been applied in analysis of counterfeit purchase intention by Wilcox et al before. It will be used in this research to explore consumers’ underlying motives of mimic luxury products purchase and moderating effect of their attitudes. The functions that attitudes serve can be classified into four main groups based on psychological needs (Katz, 1960; kelman, 1958, 1961; Shavitt, 1989; Smith, Bruner, and White 1956). The most fundamental function that attitudes serve is knowledge function. It helps to organize and structure one’s environment and provide a sense of understanding and consistency in one’s frame of reference. The utilitarian function is that attitudes can maximize rewards and minimize punishments obtained from one’s environment. Altitudes are also of importance in self-expression and social interaction. When attitudes allow the individual to express his or her underlying values and dispositions, they serve as value repressive function. The last one is social adjective function which allowing the individual to fit into social situations and behave in ways appropriate to various reference groups. These functions all contribute to a consumers’ attitude towards a particular product in different extent. Shavitt (1989) has

proved that consumers' attitudes toward luxury brands may serve a social adjustive function, a value expressive function, or both. When a person's attitude serves primarily a social adjustive function, he or she purchases a luxury product mainly because this brand is a symbol of identity and conveys a favourable, high-status image to others. Hence, identifying consumers' attitude function towards luxury brands is critical to understand their motives to purchase the mimic brands and predict the conditions under which their attitude will change (Shavitt, 1989). This implication is potentially vital for luxury brands to develop their marketing strategy targeting their consumer segmentation.

The functional theories implicate these multiple functions or goals served by attitudes as key determinants of the attitude-behaviour link (Shavitt 1989). More specifically, to maintain their social goals of projecting a particular image in social setting, consumers are more appealed to image or product form attributes when their attitude serves mainly a social-adjustive function (Snyder and DeBono (1985). On the contrary, consumers are more responsive to messages that promote intrinsic aspects of products, such as quality or reliability (i.e., product function appeals), when they hold attitudes serving a value expressive function because such messages are more readily interpretable in terms of their underlying values and dispositions (Wilcox et al., 2009).

Presumably, these theories are applicable in luxury brands contexts as well. Consumers whose attitudes toward luxury brands serving as a social adjustive function will purchase such products for the brand or image related reasons, whereas consumers whose attitudes toward luxury brands serve as a value expressive function will purchase such brands for product function or quality related reasons. Therefore, it is predicted that, compared to consumers with a predominant social adjustive attitude, who care more about the brand per se and the identity symbol of luxury products, consumers with primary value expressive attitude will have greater preference for mimic luxury products since these mimic products imitate not only the physical appearance, but also are designed to imitate the function of the model product, especially for those massive middle range brands who produce mimic products with high quality and durability. These types of mimic products meet the demands of the consumers who can't afford the luxury brands yet still want to own similar high quality products. Unlike strictly illegal counterfeit products, these mimic luxury products have their own brands, some of which are even famous national brands which are not involved in trademark infringement and are more acceptable to the general public on a moral level. Formally, the first hypothesis is generated as following:

H₁: *when consumers' attitudes toward luxury brands serve primly as a value expressive function, their purchase intension of mimic luxury brands is greater.*

Nevertheless, this does not imply that consumers with value expressive attitudes will always have greater preference for mimic luxury brands. Given that their attitudes are guided by their desires to maximize their consistency between the products they consume and their central beliefs, attitudes and values (Snyder and Debono 1985), their preference for mimic brands is also likely to vary with their values and perceptions regarding this imitation behaviour. In particular, Horen and Pieters (2012) suggest that consumers' perception of imitation products will change regarding to different imitation types. The first more pervasive type is feature imitation. It imitates the distinctive perceptual features of the model brand and in turn is more likely to be perceived as unacceptable and unfair. Consumers' moral beliefs are more sensitive to this type of imitation and thus deteriorate the evaluation of mimic brands and thus cause reactance. While the other theme imitation is to imitate underlying meaning or theme of the original brand, which is more subtle and received less attention in the marketing. Since a meaning and theme generates diverse associations that cannot be owned by one particular brand, the type of imitation is perceived to be more acceptable and less unfair.

Therefore, it is assumed that when consumers' attitudes toward luxury brands serve mainly as a value expressive function, their moral beliefs will be sensitive to imitation behaviour and their preference for mimic luxury products will be moderated by their moral beliefs. This moderating effect will be more obvious when the mimic brands imitates distinctive features of the model brands. On the contrary, when consumers' attitudes predominantly serve as a social adjustive function, their preference for mimicry should be less susceptible to their moral beliefs because they are more likely to focus on symbolizing their social identity rather than expressing their central values in making such decisions. More formally,

H_{2a}: *Consumers purchase intention of mimic brands is more moderated by their moral beliefs when their luxury brand attitudes serve a value expressive function.*

H_{2b}: *The moderating effect of consumers' moral beliefs will be amplifies when the imitation type is feature imitation.*

Even though previous researches have stated the detrimental effects of brand mimicry on the model brands and may hinder the innovation, employment and trade in the market (Plodder et al., 2012), some researchers claim that imitation is beneficial to the authentic brands in terms of stimulating the demand for the model product, increasing the price and generating high familiarity and awareness for genuine luxury brands (Barnett, 2005; Bekir et al., 2012; Nia and Zaichkowsky.,2000; Romani et al., 2012). In fact, Romani et al (2012) suggested that the presence of counterfeits can create a flattery effect. It is assumed that this flattery effect refers to the imitation as well because consumers who can afford and seek status will generate higher preference for the authentic luxury brands when they know that such design is widely mimicked by the lower brands, so as to distinguish themselves from the mass. Conversely, when consumers' attitudes toward luxury brands serve as a value expressive function, their preference for luxury brands will be less susceptible to the presence of mimic brands. This leads to the third hypothesis:

H₃: *The existence of mimic brand has a more positive effect on consumers' preferences for the model brand when their luxury brand attitudes serve a social adjustive function than when they serve a value-expressive function.*

Attitude functions can be influenced by three main factors including consumers' personality, products characteristics and situational characteristics (Shavitt, 1989). It has vital implications for luxury brand marketers to influence consumer' preference for authentic products and improve advertising effectiveness. Compared with the personality traits which are relatively immutable, products and situational characteristics are more likely to be adjusted. Shavitt (1989) proposed that the purposes that a product and its brand can serve may exert an important influence on the functions that attitudes toward it will serve. For example, a luxury product may serve multiple purposes, such as utilitarian purposes and social identity purposes of expressing one's status or values. In addition, the extent to which a luxury brand fulfils a consumer's social goals is likely to depend on the brand conspicuousness (Wilcox et al., 2009) because luxury and exclusivity often exist in the brand rather than in the product. Consequently:

When the luxury brand is conspicuous:

H_{4a}: *Consumers' attitudes toward luxury brands are more likely to serve as a social adjustive function.*

H_{4b}: The moderating effect of consumers' moral belief about mimic consumption is weaker.

H_{4c}: The positive effect of the existence of mimic brands on consumers' preference for the model brand is stronger.

Situational factors including the message itself and the context factors surrounding the message have also been shown to influence the attitude. Kelaman's research (1961) demonstrated that features of the message itself can change the motives associated with an opinion. In terms of advertising messages, the results imply that an ad copy and carefully chosen spokespeople may not only change consumers' attitudes about products and issues, but may even change the motivations that underlie those attitudes. Combined with other research on advertising (Labroo and Lee, 2006; Shavitt and Fazio, 1991; Johar and Sirgy, 1991), it concludes that exposing consumers to advertising messages that differentially prime social goals associated with value expressive versus social adjustive attitudes could influence their preference for mimic products (Wilcox et al., 2009). Consequently,

H_{5a}: When consumers are exposed to the social adjustive advertisement for a luxury brand, they are more likely to develop a social adjustive attitude toward this brand and thus the preference for the authentic luxury brand is greater.

H_{5b}: Consumers' mimic purchase likelihood is more sensitive to their moral beliefs about mimic consumption when they are exposed to the value expressive advertisement for a luxury brand than they are exposed to the social adjustive advertisement for that brand.

H_{5c}: The existence of mimic brand has a more positive effect on consumers' preferences for the model brand when they are exposed to the social adjustive advertisement for a luxury brand than they are exposed to a value expressive advertisement for that brand.

2.0 Methodology

An experimental approach will be used in this research Three studies will be conducted to measure the attitudes function of consumers and their preference changes under different imitation types, product characteristics and situational characteristics. In study 1, seven-point Likert scales will be used to measure participants' attitude functions toward luxury brands and purchase intensions for the mimic brands. Participants' moral beliefs about people who purchase mimic products are assessed as well using a three-item semantic differential scale.

The relationship between imitation types and attitudes will be measured by testing their moral beliefs and likelihood of purchasing a mimic version of a product by their favorable luxury brand.

In study 2, the findings of study 1 will be relocated in an experimental setting and the moderating effect of brand conspicuousness will be tested by assessing the preference change for a luxury bag with and without an explicit logo. The change of attitude functions and moral beliefs will be measure by the 25-item self-monitoring scale (Snyder 1974) and the same three item scale as in study 1. In study 3, participants will be shown an advertisement for a luxury brand that primes either their value expressive goals or their social adjustive goals. Purchase intention, attitude function and moral belief will be measured as in study 2 (Wilcox et al., 2009). Questionnaires will be designed for each study and real consumers will be selected randomly to participate in survey in different shopping centers.

3.0 Concluding comments

This research contributes to the Conceptualization of consumers' underlying motives using functional theories as the basis in the context of mimicry luxury brands. Consumers' attitudes toward luxury brands will be identified based on the functional theories, which enable marketers to uncover the distribution of social motives in their target population. The moderating role of consumers' moral beliefs, brand conspicuousness and advertising messages will be measured.

The research results will have vital implications for marketers in constructing their brand image and curbing consumers' demand for mimic products through the marketing mix. In addition, this research will provide evidence that the presence of mimicry can be beneficial to the model brand depending on consumers' social functions served toward the model brand and enable marketers to utilize the presence of mimicry to develop marketing strategy.

However, this research has many limitations. Firstly, it doesn't consider the cultural background in consumers' social function assessment. Research suggests that the symbolic or social functions served by brands varies with consumers' self-views and socialization (Aaker, Benet Martinez, and Garolera 2001). Therefore, research into the relationship between social attitude functions and cultural identity, both within and across cultures, in the imitation consumption context should be conducted to achieve a richer understanding of the global

demand for mimicry. Secondly, the stimulus that participants will be exposed to are images, rather than actual products. Given that sensory evaluation is important in luxury and hedonic products, this will affect participants' evaluation of luxury and mimic products and thus influence their purchase intention. Besides, this study doesn't take into account the situation that consumers could not distinguish that which brand is the original and which one is the follower. In this study, participants will be notified that which one is the imitator. Yet in market, consumers may be used to regard the lower-end brand as the imitator, which is not always the case. This will in turn influence consumers' perception and need be considered by marketers.

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